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ABSTRACT

A peer mentor program was created and implemented to reduce harassment and bullying at a Massachusetts elementary school. With the help of an adjoining district high school, the school counselors selected, trained, and supervised high school students to teach the younger children how to deal with harassment. The mentors were trained to understand the emotional and developmental needs of elementary students; they were also given training in preventing harassment, avoiding gender stereotyping, promoting tolerance, mediating conflict, listening, working in groups, and maintaining confidentiality. Monthly peer mentor sessions were designed to help children understand the meaning of harassment and bullying and how to deal with their feelings and interpersonal problems. As a result of the program, elementary school teachers reported a significant reduction in harassment. (Contains 15 references.) (EV)

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REDUCING HARASSMENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS USING HIGH SCHOOL MENTORS

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The elementary school counselor can play a significant role in reducing child-to-child harassment in the elementary school classroom. The counselor can do this by first preparing the classroom teacher to deal with harassment. Secondly, he or she can create a peer mentor program that uses high school children to mentor elementary school children.

With the help of an adjoining district high school, the counselor in a suburban Massachusetts elementary school designed a peer mentor program to deal with harassment or bullying behavior in his school.

Harassment and Bullying in the Elementary School

Batsche and Knoff (1994) note that up to twenty percent of all students are affected by bullying. Studies conducted in other countries have also addressed this problem in schools (Austin and Joseph, 1996; Olweus, 1994; Olweus, 1997; Rican, 1995; Slee, 1993; and Whitney and Smith;1993.)

Bullying can be defined as repeated and systematic harassment of either a physical or psychological nature directed against an individual child. The bullying or harassment can take the form of physical attacks or violence, verbal name-calling, intimidation, or efforts to socially isolate the target from his peers. Some children seem to be easier targets for harassment than do others. Hodges and Perry (1996) found that children who are habitually abused by peers seem to be influenced by factors, such as family relations that impede autonomy; behavioral attributes

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such as submissiveness; and social risk factors, such as the absence of supportive friends.

Bullying has adverse affects on the victim . Stein (1997) points out that bullying can interfere with a child's learning, concentration, and desire to go to school. Victims can escape to the school nurse with somatic complaints in order to avoid school (Greenbaum, 1987).

The recent violent and tragic events in Colorado and Arkansas highlight how harassment affects school safety in general. In both instances there was evidence of bullying and harassment. Bullying behavior appears to be a precursor for violence (Colvin, Tobin, Beard, Hagan, and Sprague ,1998; and Hazler,1994).

Creating a Harassment Intolerant Classroom

To prepare for the peer mentor program, the elementary school counselor helped the classroom teachers to create a climate that deals with harassment in a direct manner. Teachers were given the skills to deal with teasing and harassment incidents. The teachers were helped to implemented a three step strategy in their classrooms.

The first step was to deal with all incidents of teasing. Although "innocent" teasing may seem to be fun, children find it unproductive because it encourage them to look at differences instead of similarities and it encourages an atmosphere of condemnation rather than acceptance. When teasing occurred teachers dealt with the issue by asking the teasers to place themselves in the position of the one being teased and than reflected on how they would feel. The teachers extended this reflection to incidence of racial or ethnic jokes.

The second step was to function as a mediator when children came to the teacher with peer problems. The teachers used the following procedure:

- listen to both sides of the dispute;

- resist the temptation to resolve the problem using a teacher ruling;
- help the children to identify things that they agree upon;
- help the children to reach their own compromise position.

Using these techniques the teacher learned to serve as a mediator and not a judge. The children learned that coming to the teacher with a problem was not "tattling" but instead was bringing their dispute to a mediator.

The third step was teaching children how not to be victims. Teachers were taught to equipt children how to understand bullies and how to have a strategy to deal with their harassment. Children were taught techniques to ignore or outsmart the bully. (B. Frieman, 2000).

The Peer Mentor Program

In order to address the problem of bullying and harassment, a public elementary school serving third to fifth grade students joined with a district high school and implemented a peer mentor program. The counselors first selected and trained peer mentors and then supervised them as they taught the younger children how to deal with harassment.

Before the project started, the elementary school classroom teacher discussed the program with her/his class. In addition, parents were informed of the program and encouraged to give feedback to the school.

Peer mentors have been used in schools in other programs that have focused on academic tutoring and dealing with disruptive behavior (Bolman and Myrich, 1987; Ehly and Vazquez, 1998). There are many advantages of using high school children as peer mentors for elementary school-aged children. The mentors become surrogate big brothers and big sisters in

the eyes of some younger children, particularly those dealing with complicated family dynamics. Peer mentors serve as role models for those younger children who hero worship. The high school peer mentors also had credibility by reason of the proximity of their age to those of the elementary students.

Training and Selection of Peer Mentors

Prior to working with the elementary school children, the high school youngsters were carefully selected and trained by the counselors. High school classroom teachers were asked to recommend appropriate students for training as peer mentors. Students were carefully screened, and those selected were bright, well-rounded, mature, psychologically healthy, nurturing people. A balance of boys and girls were selected.

The selected high school mentors were trained to understand the emotional and developmental needs of the elementary school children. They were also given training in: harassment prevention, avoiding gender stereotyping, promoting tolerance, and conflict mediation. In addition they were taught skills in listening and working with groups as well as in how to deal with confidentiality in their role as mentor.

When they mastered this material, the counselor felt that they were ready to help the younger children. At all times the peer mentors received supervision from either the elementary school counselor or the high school counselor.

Peer Mentor Sessions

The goal of the sessions was to help the elementary school children understand the meaning of harassment and bullying. The children were helped to deal with their feelings and were taught skills to solve interpersonal problems. One male and one female peer mentor was

assigned to each fourth grade class in the school. They were supported by their high school advisor and the elementary school counselor and elementary school teacher to whose class they were assigned.

The classroom teacher was present for all sessions in order to support the program and to pick up on needs and concerns of the children that might surface. Prior to each experience in the elementary school, the high school mentors met with their teacher-advisor and high school counselor to discuss their upcoming session. Following each session, these professionals conducted a debriefing session to deal with any issues or concerns raised by the high school mentors.

During the first session, the peer mentors helped the children to identify what bullying looks and sound like. They helped the children to understand what it feels like to be a victim of a bully by discussing their own experiences with harassment.

The peer mentors has all the students sit in a circle and joined them creating a safe, non-threatening environment. The younger children were never forces to talk. The peer leaders began with carefully selected and screened personal recollections of their own experiences with harassment. These shared experienced helped the younger students to recognize that everyone can be both a bully and a victim at times. The session ended with a strategy plan in which the peer mentors helped the children to develop alternative ways of coping with harassment.

Forty-five minute classroom meetings between mentor and students continued on a monthly basis. In open discussions, the elementary school children shared their feelings about incidents they had experienced. Sally described how she intervened to stop a bully on the playground. Harvey said that he realized that his "harmless" teasing was really hurting a

friend and that he stopped doing it. John said that he would feel like a tattle tale if he asked a teacher for help, but his peer counselor made him feel more positive about seeking help by telling him that he would really be brave if he asked for help.

Results

The elementary school children became more open in discussing matters of harassment with their teachers outside of the special sessions. Harassment became an issue that was more openly discussed in the classroom. By encouraging children to get support from their peer mentors, the counselor felt that many children learned how to remove themselves from the role of the victim.

As a result of this program, the elementary school teachers reported that there was a significant reduction in harassment on the playground, in the cafeteria, and in the classroom. They felt that the peer mentoring program improved the climate of the school.

Summary

A peer mentor program using high school students to mentor elementary students can have a positive affect in reducing incidents of harassment in the elementary school. This program illustrates the gains that can be made when counselors on all levels work together with teachers to help children deal with pressing emotional issues.

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ABSTRACT

Reducing Harassment in Elementary School Classrooms Using High School Mentors

The elementary school counselor can play a significant role in reducing child-to-child harassment in the elementary school classroom. With the help of an adjoining district high school, the counselor in a Massachusetts elementary school designed a peer mentor program to deal with harassment or bullying behavior in his school. The program had a positive affect in reducing incidents of harassment in the elementary school. The paper describes how the program was set up and how it can be replicated in other schools.